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Interview with Anna Weinstein, Series Editor of “PERFORM : Succeeding as a Creative Professional,” Routledge (2017)

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Interview with Anna Weinstein, Series Editor of "PERFORM : Succeeding as a Creative Professional," Routledge (2017)

Interview with Anna Weinstein

Chris Qualls

Biographies

- 1 **Anna Weinstein** is the Series Editor for PERFORM. A writer and editor with over fifteen years of experience in educational publishing, she received her MFA in Writing for the Performing Arts from the University of California at Riverside--Palm Desert and her BA in Communication Studies/Performance from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She teaches introductory and advanced screenwriting at Auburn University, and she is a frequent contributor to *Film International*, where she publishes interviews with award-winning female directors in her series "Diva Directors Around the Globe."
- 2 **Chris Qualls** is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Auburn University, where he teaches voiceover acting, acting for stage and screen, and introduction to theater. He received his MFA in Acting from the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and his BA in Communication Studies/Film from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has worked as a voiceover actor for thirty years. His research and creative work focus on the integration of classical and nontraditional approaches to Shakespeare in performance, theater and media for social justice, and voice acting. He is a member of Actors' Equity Association.

Introduction

- 3 The PERFORM book series, published by Routledge, Taylor & Francis, is a series of books geared toward college students who are studying the arts. The series includes practical, real-world insights from working professionals in various creative fields, including film and theatre. The first three books, *Writing for the Screen*, *Directing for the Screen*, and *Acting for the Stage*, were published in February 2017.
- 4 I am the co-editor with Anna Weinstein on *Acting for the Stage*, and Anna is the editor of *Writing for the Screen* and *Directing for the Screen*. Anna is also the series editor for PERFORM. I interviewed Anna in her home office for this piece, which was easy enough to do since we happen to share a home. (Full disclosure : we're married and have been sharing our lives for thirty years.)

[Figure 1]



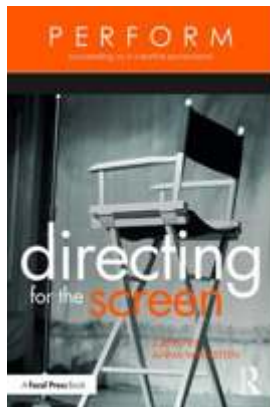
Credits : by Routledge, Taylor & Francis

[Figure 2]



Credits : by Routledge, Taylor & Francis

[Figure 3]



Credits : by Routledge, Taylor & Francis

Interview

Chris Qua

lls : Let's begin with a two-part question. First, what is the complete title for the PERFORM book series, and why ? And two, what was the impetus for the series ?

Anna Weinstein : The subtitle is "Succeeding as a Creative Professional," which is fitting because the intent of the series is to explore definitions of *success* in creative fields and what it means to perform creatively in a professional capacity and how this compares to performing as an amateur, or aspiring professional. As far as the impetus for the series, I think this is something I've been contemplating for years, this idea of success and performance anxiety and what it takes to make a living and a life as an artist. I grew up in an artistic family, and I wonder how long I've been quietly considering this concept of professionalism in the arts and who gets to decide whether one is a professional or a hobbyist. Where is that line ?

CQ : Have you discovered the answer ?

Anna Weinstein : The answer is complex, but in short, the line doesn't really exist—and it doesn't exist because it's different for everyone. In the end, we simply need to be comfortable calling our art *art* and ourselves *professionals*, regardless of where anyone else draws that line. For me, professionalism has to do with behavior and attitude more than anything else. I expect my students to behave as if they're professionals. I expect them to do their best work, to be respectful and offer critical and thoughtful feedback. Of course I also want them to enjoy themselves and have fun with the process of writing a screenplay, but professionalism is important to me, as well.

CQ : Tell me about the true beginning of the series. You've said that you were inspired by your students ?

Anna Weinstein : Yes, my very first class. I started teaching screenwriting in the fall of 2014, and I was absolutely thrilled to be teaching. I was so impressed with my students' work and grateful that I was able to offer them guidance with their writing. But at the same time, I was troubled that I wasn't able to support them in their endeavors to work in the industry. I could point them to internship opportunities and direct them to screenwriting competitions that were considered important, of

course, but I wasn't able to offer them real-world advice about making a living as a screenwriter. My own experiences were limited to writing on spec.

CQ : Writing on spec for a highly reputable producer and company.

Anna Weinstein : True, but still, on spec. Now, I had my professors from graduate school and their real-world industry experiences to pass along as examples—and of course, I could share the stories and advice that I'd read about over the years. But I wanted to be able to offer my students more.

CQ : To clarify, you're talking specifically about the business of screenwriting, not the craft ?

Anna Weinstein : Right, yes. By the time I started teaching, I was confident that I could support my students with the craft of screenwriting. In fact, looking back on it, I think I was surprised by the end of my first semester to see just how successful I was as a teacher. I had never intended on teaching—that wasn't my reasoning for going to graduate school—but I was encouraged to discover that I was able to help nurture my students' voices. They made significant leaps over the course of that first semester, and I suppose it was inspiring to see that I could succeed in the area of craft and also a bit disappointing that I wasn't able to teach them about the business with any firsthand knowledge. I wrote my initial email to my publisher that December over winter break.

CQ : This was an informal email that you wrote ?

Anna Weinstein : As I recall, there was a form you could fill out online. It wasn't anything terribly complicated. Name, email, and a space to write about your book idea.

CQ : How long was it before you heard back ?

Anna Weinstein : Right away. I believe I wrote the email on the weekend, and I got a response from my editor that week. She called, and it became clear that she too thought this was a series with legs. I think the idea of teaching people how to make a living as an artist is really contrary to everything we've ever learned about making art. The point of art isn't to make money—it's to tap into our creative energy and allow it an opportunity to develop into something that is satisfying and cathartic and wholly unique to us. In some ways, it almost seems uncouth to discuss the concept of profiting from this creativity. And certainly, school is about building our skills and learning how to harness our talents ; it's hardly the time to worry about making money. We're still learning while we're in school. That seems to be the prevailing thought, at least insofar as the arts are concerned. What a silly idea that we might make a living as a poet or as a writer or as an actor !

CQ : How long was it before you began working on the first three books ?

Anna Weinstein : I wrote the proposal for the series in the weeks that followed, in January, and then the review process took a few months. I began working on the first three books sometime that spring.

CQ : How would you describe your goal for the series ?

Anna Weinstein : My goal was to share insights from a wide range of professionals working in theatre and film and television, to offer real-world stories and expertise about the different types of scenarios young actors, writers, and directors might encounter when they begin working. For instance, for *Acting for the Stage*, I know we both wanted to share stories from experts about what it's like to work in the theatre,

the different ways actors can make a living, the different ways actors can struggle, find support and strength, get beyond their nerves or performance anxiety, etc. We wanted to explore what that cycle of work looks like for an actor—the idea that you have to get started, and then go through that challenging stage of sticking with it before you find success, and then finding success, and then pushing ahead and moving beyond that plateau. And eventually, even daily, we begin that cycle again. All creatives do. We begin the cycle again and again and again.

CQ : I know what you mean, but could you clarify ? “Eventually, even daily” ?

Anna Weinstein : I mean that this idea of “Starting Again” can mean starting again each day when we wake up and tackle whatever creative project we’re working on, or it can mean starting again after a significant failure, or it can mean starting again after a significant success. It can mean any number of things. For the creative person, we always find ourselves in the position of starting over. It’s something we’re accustomed to, because we’ve started over thousands of times. But sometimes—and I think this is what inspired me the most about this concept—sometimes starting again can seem so enormously difficult that we just don’t think we have it in us. We don’t want to start again. We don’t think we can pick ourselves up off the floor. We thought we’d gotten past all that, whatever *that* is. But of course, we’ll have the wind knocked out of us at some point, and I think that’s what that chapter is really speaking to—those readers who understand just how impossible it can seem sometimes to start again.

CQ : And the act of creating—the art itself, whatever the form—can be an important part of rebuilding your strength, right ?

Anna Weinstein : Of course. I remember one of my professors saying once that stories are a safe place, and that really resonated with me. I do feel safe in those worlds I create. It’s a good escape, a good way to share, to lose myself. I heard someone say recently that if we don’t give ourselves a creative outlet, whether that’s making jewelry or singing or writing or acting, that creativity will come out in our lives, and likely not in a productive way. I really think that’s true.

CQ : What’s that quote we were talking about ?

Anna Weinstein : “Be regular and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work.” Gustave Flaubert, the writer of *Madame Bovary*.

CQ : Save the drama for the work.

Anna Weinstein : Exactly. Which is hard if you’re not working ! So that’s what that chapter is—and all of the chapters really, in different ways—a plea to students and readers to do the work. When it’s most difficult to do that work, that’s when it’s probably most important.

CQ : Let’s talk for a moment about the chapters in the series. You’ve referred to them, but could you explain ?

Anna Weinstein : Right. Across the book series, there are five chapters in each book : “Getting Started”, “Sticking It Out”, “Finding Success”, “Getting Ahead”, and “Starting Again”. So whether it’s about writing or directing or acting or any other type of art form, this is a cycle that we can cycle through daily, weekly, annually, and over our lifetime. I loved exploring these stages and hearing other artists’ take on this. I left it up to the essayists to determine where their piece would be a good fit for the books. Would they most like to explore the concept of getting started ? Or finding

success? Which stage do they most connect with? I'll tell you that most of the contributors knew right away what they wanted to examine. For the artists that I interviewed, that was a bit different. Where I ended up placing the interviews really depended on the direction that the interviews took. You know this, with *Acting for the Stage*. We could have placed several of those interviews in different chapters, but there always seemed to be one that was the best fit.

CQ : Could you share some insights from the books that you have found most useful to you personally? You've quoted some of the people you interviewed many times over the past few years. Their stories and advice have really stuck with you.

Anna Weinstein : It's really true. First, I should say that I interviewed people I've admired for years and years, so it was truly a delight and thrill to have the opportunity to speak with so many of these artists—directors like Michael Apted (*Coal Miner's Daughter*) and Peter Segal (*Tommy Boy*), and writer-directors like Boaz Yakin (*Remember the Titans*) and Mary Harron (*American Psycho*), or writers like Barry Morrow (*Rain Man*). Of course, interviewing Ellen Burstyn was a particular thrill. She had such wisdom, such grace, really such an insightful and intelligent take on the work involved with acting, it was an honor to get her perspective. I keep coming back to several insights that she shared. One had to do with taking the punches, pulling yourself up again after a perceived failure, not getting cast in a part, etc. She said that she'd suffered quite a lot of adversity growing up, but those experiences made her more resilient. She said,

It's one of the advantages of having a difficult childhood—that you don't sink. You do recover. You become a survivor. It's like when they make steel stronger by pounding on it. So I've never been one to give up. It just doesn't interest me I guess. If one thing doesn't work, I try another.

CQ : An amazing quote.

Anna Weinstein : It really was pretty stunning. She also had a lot of insight about the perception of success. She was talking about how she tends to ruminate on her failures, so no matter whether other people consider her a success, she doesn't feel like a success. She said, "...there are so many things I wish I had done, or wish I had done differently, or shouldn't have done."

CQ : And Michael Apted said something similar?

Anna Weinstein : He was talking about the price of success. For readers who don't know, Apted's films have received dozen of nominations for Golden Globes, Oscars, and BAFTAs over the years. He also directed movies like *Gorillas in the Mist* and the renowned *Up!* documentary series, which might be my favorite series of documentaries. It's incredibly moving. But he said,

I've always believed that you can't have everything. If you're going to work like I've worked, and travel like I've traveled, it's very, very hard to sustain a personal life, which has been a great sorrow for me. But it's what I did, what I chose, and there's been a lot of damage caused by that.

He went on to say that he really loves to work, though, and that he's happiest when he's working, that he wouldn't really know what to do with his time if he weren't working—that he doesn't particularly have a lot of hobbies. It was fascinating to hear his take on the work.

CQ : I know you were also moved by Boaz Yakin's story. What did you find compelling about his perspective ?

Anna Weinstein : Boaz Yakin wrote and directed *A Price Above Rubies*, which is definitely one of the films from the 1990s that has stuck with me the most over the years—truly a stunning and moving film. He also directed *Remember the Titans*, and he wrote and directed *Safe* and wrote films like *Now You See Me*. But yes, hearing his perspective on the emotional toll the industry can take and how he navigates the business aspects of the industry, I guess I found it inspiring to hear that someone with his level of success can find it emotionally challenging to work in the industry, and yet still he persists. He talked about some of the emotional work he's done in recent years to be better able to deal with the frustrating aspects of the industry.

And by the way, he also had some really intelligent insights into creativity and what happens when we stifle it. I was asking him about a monologue that he'd written for Renee Zellweger's character in *A Price Above Rubies*—it was an amazing monologue, and I thought it was remarkable that he had the insight to write this when he was in his twenties. He was wise beyond his years. This is what he said in response :

If I remember correctly, I think it had something to do with the idea that when you're younger, this excitement or energy or creativity or passion—whatever you want to call it—it doesn't have limitations on it. But as she got older, all these other factors came in to keep that thing from becoming something that she could externalize. And when you can't externalize or act on the things that move you the most, they become painful—and you can become self-destructive or destructive... this passion for life and excitement and sexual energy and emotional energy and all that stuff that develops in you when you're young, when it gets stifled, it starts to eat you up.

CQ : Again, almost a plea to do the work of creating.

Anna Weinstein : Exactly.

CQ : Any final pieces advice or wisdom you'd like to share ? I immediately think about Richard Robichaux's thoughts about moving toward what you want.

Anna Weinstein : Robichaux has acted in many of Richard Linklater's films. He was the Head of Acting at Penn State and is now a Professor at UC San Diego. Yes, he talks at length about not moving away from something or somewhere if you're unhappy with it, but instead moving toward what you want or where you want to be. That difference in attitude is important, because you're empowered if you're actively pursuing the thing that you want. Don't run away, run forward.

If I could leave our readers with one powerful reminder, it would be something Barry Morrow said when I interviewed him. Barry Morrow wrote *Rain Man*, and he wrote that script after writing the film *Bill*, which is a story about his friend Bill Sackter, a mentally impaired gentleman twice his age who he befriended and became the legal guardian of. He said that what's most important for any artist is to really live, to go out into the world and gather stories. If you want your stories to really sing—to stand apart as authentic and exceptional—you have to live an authentic life where you're genuinely engaging and developing relationships with people. In other words, in order to create characters that ring true at the level of Raymond and Charlie Babbitt, you have to get to know people with some level of intimacy.

I'm interpreting now, but I believe he was talking about vulnerability—being willing to open yourself up to another human being and accept their vulnerabilities and expose your own. It's something a lot of the artists discuss in the books, including

Ellen Burstyn. Whether we're writers, directors, or actors, whether for stage or screen, ultimately we're trying to find truth in our stories and characters. We're looking to expose and examine in a fresh and authentic way some truth about the human experience. That's our goal. And really living, really engaging in life, that's the first step.

ABSTRACTS

Interview with Anna Weinstein, who is the Series Editor of the PERFORM book series, published by Routledge, Taylor & Francis

Entretien avec Anna Weinstein, éditrice de la collection "PERFORM book series" chez Routledge, Taylor & Francis

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Mots-clés: jeu, mise en scène, film, scénarisation, television, théâtre, Michael Apted, Ellen Burstyn, Boaz Yakin, Peter Segal, Mary Harron, Renee Zellweger, Richard Linklater, Barry Morrow, Richard Robichaux, Bill Sackter, Gustave Flaubert

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